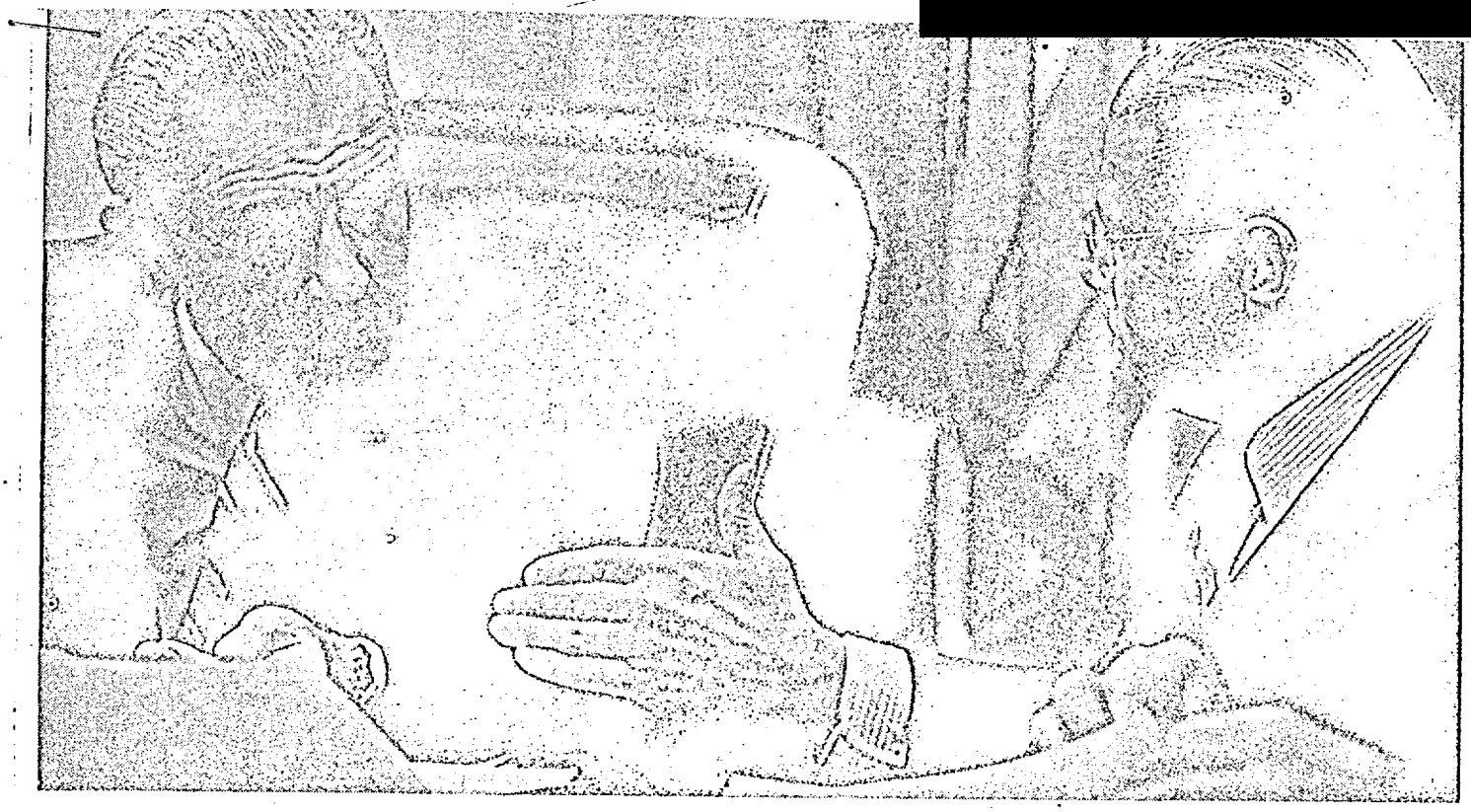
NEWSWEEK
3 JUN 1974



Johnson and McNamara, 1968: And now the time of judgment for men who managed an unpopular war

THE SECRET HISTORY OF VIETNAM

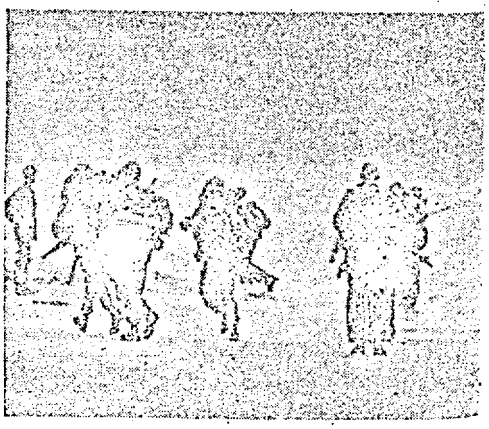
It looked like one of those studies that gather dust in the stacks of university libraries: 47 typescript volumes bound in dissertation blue and titled (HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES DECISION-MAKING PROCESS ON VIETNAM POLICY) in academic gray. But inside its cardboard covers was the stuff of tragedy—a top-secret Pentagon record of many of the choices, guesses, mistakes and deceptions that attended America's descent into a bitter and divisive war. First The New York Times, then The Washington Post surfaced parts of the study last week—enough both to illuminate the deepening U.S. involvement back to the Eisenhower days and to feed a growing national appetite for villains to blame for all of the traumata of Vietnam. The shock waves were still reverberating when the Nixon Administration moved to stop the disclosures by court order—and so turned a painful wrench backward in history into an unprecedented confrontation between the government and the press.

The Pentagon study, commissioned by Robert McNamara in his last disillusioned days as Secretary of Defense, offered raw material enough to damage reputations—and sustain recriminations—through four administrations dating to Harry Truman's. Yet none of it cut deeper than the implication that Lyndon Johnson and his war counselors [illegible] cluded—had planned the great escalations of 1964-65 long in advance and then had lied about their plans for political as well as military advantage. Johnson men among others insisted that it just wasn't that way—that the study was narrow, selective and out of context and possibly biased as well. But the suspicion held the headlines, and the reaction was hauntingly reminiscent to some spectators of the long, debilitating who-lost-China debates of a generation ago.

Both houses of Congress planned investigations—the Senate into who got America into the war, the House into why such documents as the Pentagon report are kept classified so long after the fact. The military said the disclosures might compromise America's secret codes of the '60s. The Soviet press splashed the story. Hanoi crowed over it. Friendly governments worried that it infringed on their confidential dealings with Washington—and in some cases made them look like accomplices in the war. Democrats were stung, Republicans nervous. And the will to go on fighting flickered perceptibly lower. "This," said a current U.S. official in Saigon, "is just one more nail in the coffin of America's involvement in Vietnam."

The response by the Administration was as extraordinary as the event—an at- [illegible] government, to [illegible] the first time in U.S. history, to legally bar a newspaper from publishing a story. The scoop caught official Washington off guard—Mr. Nixon himself didn't know any such study existed until he read his Sunday Times—and three installments, all dealing with the Johnson years, got out before the government could stop them.

The FBI mounted an all-out hunt for the source of the leak—and soon focused on Daniel Ellsberg, 40, a sometime Defense and State Department analyst turned antiwar activist (page 16). The Justice Department tried to put a lid on any further disclosures by getting tem-



[illegible] Marines land at Da Nang: [illegible]

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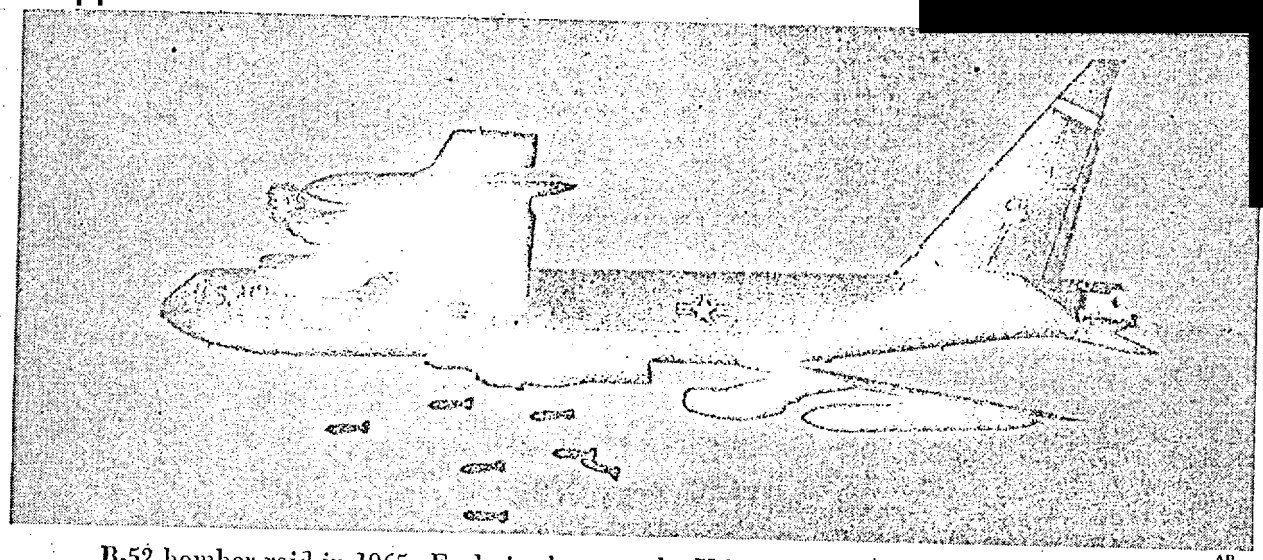

B-52 bomber raid in 1965: Early in the war, the U.S. ran out of alternatives to pressure

The War According to the Pentagon Papers

The secret Vietnam study commissioned by Robert McNamara is a historian's dream and a statesman's nightmare. With the story splashed on page one, Americans have for the first time been able to read some of the crucial secret documents of a war that is still being fought. The Pentagon papers are, at best, only an incomplete account of America's slide into the Vietnam quagmire. But they are also a revealing—and deeply disturbing—account of the delusions, deceptions and honest errors of judgment that propelled the United States into a destructively unpopular war.

The initial installments published by The New York Times and The Washington Post transfix some members of Lyndon Johnson's Administration in a merciless spotlight. McNamara labors on as the war's most tireless technocrat even after he has begun to lose heart for the fight. Walt Whitman Rostow clings doggedly to the assumption that America is simply too powerful to be thwarted. Maxwell Taylor, the humanist general for whom Robert Kennedy named one of his sons, blusters like a pouty proconsul. And the Bundy brothers grind out options to order, while generals and admirals constantly promote the idea that more is better.

Other reputations gain from the exposure. George Ball's standing as a prescient dove is enhanced by the tone of his memorandums, and the intelligence services—particularly the CIA—weigh in with advice that, in retrospect, often seems to have been dead right. The spotlight skips over still other key policymakers. Dean Rusk figures only rarely in most of the narrative. And except for brief appearances, the most important actor of all—Lyndon Johnson—broods alone in the middle distance.

The material that was made public covers a period beginning in 1954, dips over the Kennedy years and focuses on the wartime Johnson era. But even when it concentrates on the LBJ years, the Pentagon study is by no means the final word. It provides a fascinating peek into the government's files, but it contains few White House or State Department records of the period. It also draws on few of the private memorandums that McNamara, Rusk and others wrote for the President, and it shows no trace of the many private, soul-searching conversations between top officials. Flawed as a current account, the study is no less seriously flawed as a retrospective because the Pentagon analysts were not permitted to interview the principal players in the drama.

But despite those shortcomings, the study is invaluable. The Eisenhower era material—first printed in The Washington Post—strikes many of the notes that were to echo throughout America's involvement in Vietnam. There is the strong assumption that the stakes extend beyond Indochina to all of Asia, and that the U.S. is embroiled in a proxy confrontation with Communist China. There are the efforts to solve problems by backstage maneuvering. And, above all, there is Washington's repeated inability to make events in Indochina conform to its desires.

A Vote Against Elections

In 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles fought hard but unsuccessfully at the Geneva conference on Indochina to prevent the scheduling of elections in Vietnam which, he feared, "might eventually mean unification [of] Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh." But despite Dulles's strong stand, the U.S. backed away from taking overt action on its own in Indochina. In 1955, when South Vietnamese strongman Ngo Dinh Diem refused even to consider holding elections, Washington shrugged and went along. The Pentagon analysis declares: "The U.S. did not—as is often alleged—connive with Diem to ignore the elections." And although Dwight Eisenhower permitted the military to draw up contingency plans for American intervention in Laos and Vietnam, he decided against such a step when Dulles failed to line up support from America's allies.

By the time Lyndon Johnson took office, the situation in South Vietnam had worsened. Diem had been assassinated, and the sad series of revolving-door juntas that followed him were fast losing their grip on the country. "We should watch the situation very carefully," Defense Secretary McNamara wrote in December 1963 after a visit to South Vietnam, "running scared, hoping for the best, but preparing for more forceful moves if the situation does not show early signs of improvement." This concern was by no means confined to secret government deliberations. By March 1964, Sen. J. William Fulbright was warning Congress that there were "only two realistic options open to us in Vietnam in the immediate future: the expansion of the conflict in one way or another or a renewed effort to bolster the capacity of the South Vietnamese to prosecute the war successfully on its present scale." And as the mood of crisis deepened, many newspapers—including The New York Times—warned against the possible loss of South Vietnam to the Communists.

But although the American people were well aware that things were going badly in South Vietnam—an awareness that would be heightened during the Goldwater-Johnson election campaign—a whole spectrum of undercover activities was kept secret from them. The Pentagon papers show that on Feb. 1, 1964, "an elaborate program of covert military operations against the state of North Vietnam was approved" under the code name Operation Plan 34A. Directed from

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